

By Daniel Ellsberg

Not Again!

**The gulf feels
a lot like early
Vietnam, but
Congress ducked
its duty.**

I'M WRITING THIS ON ELECTION DAY 1990, THREE months into a crisis that has felt to me like reliving the late summer and fall of 1964. There's no pleasure in the memory. I thought the country had learned better; I didn't believe Congress could forget so much.

Once again, I have been watching the executive branch moving fast toward launching a war that might well be catastrophic, a war that we could avoid, a war that the great majority of the public would almost surely reject if it were put to them, and if they understood what it would probably mean.

This is not a Grenada or a Panama we're preparing for. The Center for Strategic and International Studies has calculated thirty thousand U.S. soldiers would be killed or wounded if the Iraqis conduct a fighting withdrawal from Kuwait, or higher if the Iraqis "fight to the death, defending current positions," to say nothing of

or even question the imminent prospect of such carnage, as if they were asleep, as if they were still, as when the crisis first found them, on vacation. That's the part I'm still struggling to understand, especially because the greatest contrast with 1964 is that, this time, the administration has hardly concealed its preparations for a big war.

In 1964, there were hawks outside the executive branch calling for an offensive air war, the kind of "surgical" bombing, in fact, that Henry Kissinger lately has been advocating against Iraq, and that General Michael Dugan was promoting just before he was recently fired as air-force chief of staff.

Back then, the bombing was being routed by the Republican candidate for president, Senator Barry Goldwater, who was an air-force major general in the reserves. But in those days, the president, Lyndon Johnson, indicated that he sharply opposed that or any offensive strategy. He "sought no wider war" and, unlike George Bush this fall, did not threaten one during the campaign. American boys, he said, "would not be sent to do the job that Asian boys should be doing."

The reality in 1964 was that the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, had authorized the Joint Chiefs of Staff early in the year to pick targets in North Vietnam and to carry out all preparations for a full bombing campaign of the Goldwater type. I participated in this from the time of the Tonkin Gulf incident as special assistant to the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. On Election Day 1964, twenty-six years ago today, I represented my boss and the office of the secretary of defense at an interagency meeting held to discuss alternative bombing strategies. We hadn't met to compare long-planned bombing options the day *before* the election, because that just might have leaked, reducing Johnson's landslide. And we didn't wait till the day *after* the voting, because there was felt to be no time to lose.

On that same day, Americans, as expected, were registering a landslide vote largely *against* Goldwater's bombing proposals—which we incumbents were, in secret, planning to implement. When the steady bombing campaign did begin, in February, initiating the most deadly and costly phase of the Vietnam War, insiders like myself knew what to expect, but it came without warning to Congress or the public. Congress had that excuse for having failed to do anything to stop it, or even to investigate or debate it.

But that didn't change the reality that our democratic and constitutional system had been abused or shown to be a sham, in the field of foreign policy. The Goldwater campaign had boasted "A CHOICE, NOT AN ECHO," but



1971: The Pentagon Papers, leaked by Ellsberg, spark a House investigation. 1990: Why doesn't Congress probe Bush's war plans?

casualties among civilians and our military allies. Even Vietnam did not prepare us for the pace and scale of the projected slaughter. One estimate by U.S. commanders, reported in the *San Francisco Examiner*, is for ten thousand allied dead in the first twelve days of combat.

Yet, just as in that campaign summer of 1964, the Congress, the media, the churches, campuses, and the public at large have been doing almost nothing to resist

on Vietnam, the voters were really offered no choice at all. The public's clearly registered will on peace versus war was flaunted. Congress, given exclusive power by the Constitution over the decision to go to war, was kept in the dark and manipulated.

OVER A QUARTER CENTURY LATER, OUR constitutional system, in the face of impending war, is again failing to operate as the framers intended. There are major differences in the way it is happening this time; but they don't all represent improvements.

This time the planned-for air strikes have been discussed openly; General Dugan was fired for indiscretion, but not for inaccuracy. There is no talk this fall of leaving the "job" of a Kuwait invasion to Arab boys alone. And yet, almost eerily, the prospect of American young men and women killing and dying in the desert was no factor in electoral races. Despite polls revealing widespread unease about the conflict and large majorities opposing the option of imminent offensives that the administration was openly preparing and threatening, U.S. voters were not offered a chance to register a choice on this transcendent issue, nor did they demand one or complain about the lack. Compared to 1964, this was not a great step forward for democracy.

Congress is behaving in an even more dismaying way this time, because it hasn't the excuse of having been lied to about war plans. To be sure, for the first month, the president and his officials insisted, on the record, that the military tasks of our forces in Saudi Arabia were defensive and deterrent; we had "drawn a line in the sand" to defend Saudi Arabia. Our strategy for pressing Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait was not military but economic: the embargo. These were goals that the majority of Americans, including myself, still support.

But for over two months now, countless officials have told reporters, on background, of undeclared goals—destroying Iraq's military capability and its nuclear and chemical facilities, or blasting Iraqis from Kuwait—that can only be achieved by offensive attack, that is, by war. The last 100,000 U.S. troops sent to the gulf and, even more so, the next 100,000 just authorized, are clearly intended exclusively for such purposes, which the president is threatening ever more openly.

Perhaps Saddam will back down in the face of these threats and withdraw from Kuwait unconditionally. Perhaps Arab states and other allies will broker a deal, even against U.S. wishes. Perhaps the United States and its allies will wait indefinitely for the embargo to take effect. Perhaps the administration's threats of offensive action

have been bluffs from the beginning. Perhaps the president, under a surge of public and congressional pressure not now apparent, will rethink an attack. Or perhaps, as these words are read, the war is well under way, or over.

What won't change, however, is that, as of November 6, life and death choices have been left entirely to President Bush, uninstructed by any congressional hearings, investigations, resolutions, or budget constraints. Congress has failed even to invoke the War Powers Act, and has passed resolutions that, in effect, give George Bush the powers of George III. And that is a failure of

Congress didn't ask: What will be the "butcher's bill"? And this time, it didn't even have the excuse of being lied to.

our constitutional system and of our democracy, as shocking and dangerous as it was in 1964.

Whatever happens, this lesson will remain: For at least three months into a deadly prewar crisis in 1990, Congress, by its own sheer passivity, out of political cowardice and irresponsibility, gave the president a totally free hand to commit this country to a major war in a distant land—as if the Constitution had never decreed otherwise, as if Vietnam had never happened.

WE MUST DEMAND THAT CONGRESS TAKE its powers back. That is the lesson that we should draw from this replay of 1964 and 1965. Current talk of "consultation" is grossly inadequate. The framers of the Constitution got it right the first time, in giving the decision of whether to go to war *exclusively* to Congress, and denying it to the executive branch—which, in Madison's words to Jefferson, is "the branch of power most interested in war, and most prone to it." The framers intended precisely to avoid unnecessary or wrongful wars caused, as Tom Paine put it, by "the pride of kings."

Through most of this fall's session, Congress mocked that wisdom. Finally, on the day of adjournment, October 26, eighty-

two House Democrats issued a last-second wake-up call to their colleagues, drafted by Congressman Ronald Dellums, declaring themselves "emphatically opposed to any offensive military action." They demanded that the president, in accordance with his constitutional obligations, not undertake any such action before seeking and getting a declaration of war from Congress, after due congressional deliberation.

As I write this, Congress is long overdue in calling hearings that ask not *will* the president send us into war, but *should* the country go to war, or *should* Congress forbid the president to do so. On behalf of the public in keeping with its constitutional duties Congress should have investigated key questions such as:

What are the best estimates of civilian casualties from U.S. air strikes on Iraq and Kuwait?

What are the estimated U.S. and allied casualties resulting from various methods of attack to retake Kuwait?

Under what conditions might a ground war be extended throughout Iraq, and what are estimated U.S. casualties?

What is the range of possible casualties inflicted by Iraqi retaliatory attacks, including chemical warfare, on cities in Israel, Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia?

What is the likelihood of terrorist attack in the West?

In short, what will be the "butcher's bill"? How much blood will there be in the gasoline?

My hope is that, as you read this, such hearings have already come about early enough to lead to budgetary and other restraints on presidential initiatives. If so, our system may yet be made to work in time to save us from a war. But we must never again let things get to this point.

"Consignments of body bags are being flown into Saudi Arabia almost daily," November 1 article in my local paper reports. "To the shock of some GIs flying to Saudi Arabia, much of the mortuary equipment is being carried on regular flights next to the men." What comes to mind are Ron Kovic's words: "Didn't we promise ourselves we would never let this happen again?"

Daniel Ellsberg is the former defense- and state-department official who made history by releasing the Pentagon Papers. He recommends that families of soldiers in the Persian Gulf, and others who wish to support our troops by averting an offensive war, contact: The Military Families Support Network, P.O. Box 11098, Milwaukee, WI 53211; (414) 964-3859; fax: (414) 964-3860.